

Family Tree

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I don't know how many of you have ever done any work to trace or understand your family tree, your family lineage, your genealogy. From whence you have come. The McConnell family tree is pretty sketchy – and I mean that in probably every use of that term. We trace things back a few generations and then things get fuzzy. We can figure things out back a couple hundred of years enough to see that the McConnell's found their way here to America from Northern Ireland – and likely before that, Scotland. Enough to know that some McConnell back a couple hundred years ago hopped on board a ship and made their voyage. They left their homeland and sailed the tempestuous seas and found a new home somewhere here in America.

Most of us have the same kind of story somewhere in our family tree – someone, somewhere and sometime decided that they were going to go. They were going to go to a new land. The reasons could be a hundred fold. Economics. Drought and famine. War. Refugees. Running from the law (we're guessing this was the McConnell story). Religious persecution. A chance to start over. But likely every one of us has in our past an immigrant scene that starts with a tearful good-bye with family and friends, and then a ship's boarding and a setting sail for a new land. Maybe you were the one that left – you're the first generation -- or maybe it happened a few hundred years ago. But there came a time when one generation said to another generation, "We must go. We must move on. We must strike out for a new land." We are the product of someone's immigrant dream. There is an immigrant story inside each of our family trees.

And so it is in God's great story. If you have been reading this week you have been reading through chapter after chapter of family tree. Dozens of names and dozens of generations. All the way from the time of Noah through the story of the Tower of Babel all the way to the end of Genesis 11 we have this seemingly never-ending list of name of people who form the family tree of Abram. Abram, who will soon be Abraham. And for the most part this family tree of people propagated in the same region of the world – the land called Ur – a region along the Euphrates River in what is present day Iraq. Now in the third and fourth centuries BC – some 5000 years ago – there was really no reason for people to venture very far beyond the very place where they were born and raised. There was no travel channel to suggest some exotic place in which to relocate. Ur for these people was the place where you are born, where you live, where you give birth and where you die. Life was self-contained cycle of birth, life, giving birth and death. A provincial family tree.

But then we learn two things. First the family tree for Abram and Sarai his wife was coming to an end – at least their part of it. They were unable to have children. The branches of the tree would grow around them, but not through them. Second, Terah, Abram's father, senses in himself the need to leave Ur. "Terah (and Abram and Sarai) went out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan." "I must go," Terah said, "I must move on. I must strike out." But then we are told that in his striking out to Canaan -- Terah went only as far as a ways up the river to a place called Haran, in present day Turkey, and he stopped. He stopped and he settled. Canaan is the dream but Terah settles for Haran. Terah went from the land of Ur, dreaming of Canaan, but he settled in Haran. He went, but he settled.

Now there is something good about settling. Putting down roots, Pounding down the stakes. There always comes a time to settle. Terah went, and he settled.

But then we are told that Terah died and now it is left up to Abram and Sarai – the barren Abram and Sarai -- to decide what to do. Do we go back to Ur? Go back home. Go back to our people. Father has died, so do we now return to the place of old? Or – or do we stay settled? Or – or do we move on? Where is this family tree going to go? And then the Genesis writer tells us, "Now

the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make of your bareness a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." And then come these words: "So Abram went."

Terah dreamt of Canaan and settled in Haran. The Lord said to Abram, "Go to Canaan." And Abram went.

Tom Cahill the insightful historian in his great history of western civilization, *The Hinges of History*, says that those two words, "Abram went" are perhaps the two boldest words in all of literature. Because out of the great cycle of settled-ness and the great sadness of bareness – there emerges a man and a woman who unsettle themselves to go – trusting that in the going – God will make good on His promise for new life. Abram went to the land of Canaan – and in doing so experienced the faithfulness of God by being a blessing and father to all the nations.

Terah dreamt of Canaan, but settled in Haran. Abram heard the voice of God and unsettled himself from Haran and trusted the promise of new life and went to Canaan.

You know a lot of life is lived between the settling and the going. The settling and the going. Now when I talk about the settling and the going – I'm not necessarily thinking about our geographical relocating. Of course I can only imagine that a lot of us have done a lot of that. Most everybody that lives in Florida understands geographical relocation. Most of us are from somewhere else. We have pulled up stakes at some point in our lives.

But the settling and going I am thinking about is the movement that takes place in our minds and our hearts and our souls. How settled are you in your mind and heart and soul? How tied are you into the patterns of the past, the settled sense of your world, the old system of family and friends and relatives? How beholden are you to the ancestry of your life. And ... how drawn are you to respond to the voice of God inside you and to strike out and go and claim a new place where you

can bear fruit. What stems and branches are forming out of you on the great family tree of which you are a part? Or has the fruit stopped growing with you. Is life so settled, is there no more room to grow, is there no place in your soul to discover – such that you might be a blessing. God said to Abram, “I will bless you to be a blessing.”

The Social Sciences have been for a long time telling us that we are products of the conditioning of the past. That human beings for the most part are conditioned creatures. Conditioned by our parents, conditioned by our families, conditioned by our environment and even products of our genetic codes. That the human reality is that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. We are chips of the old blocks. Branches from the same trunk. And somewhere along the way we subconsciously become settled with that. We put down stakes on our part of the family tree and it doesn't go much farther from that. That we are here to repeat the past.

Remember the haunting story – passed down they say since the 13th century -- of the farmer and his family who could see that the farmer's father was growing more feeble, so he and his family decided to take him in. And at first they were glad to have the old man live with them. His presence was a joy. But more and more he grew to be a burden. He was harder to take care of. And more and more the family complained of all his demands. Finally at dinner one night after another round of whispered complaints the farmer looked to his son and out of exhaustion and resignation said to the boy, “It's time to take your grandfather out to the barn to live. So take him out there and find the best horse blanket and wrap him in it to keep him warm.” So the son took his grandfather out to the barn and found the best horse blanket but before he wrapped his grandfather in it he tore it in two. He set one half aside and wrapped his grandfather with the other half. Later when his father found out what the boy did, how he had thought to spare only half the horse blanket for his grandfather, he went to the boy and scolded him. “How could you do such a thing? What kind of boy would use only half a blanket to warm his grandfather?” “But father,” the boy replied, “I'm saving the other half for you.”

Without our knowing it sometimes, the family tree conditions us into repeating the same old story over and over again. We get settled. We bear little fruit.

Maybe that's why Jesus talked about being the vine but that his father is the vinedresser. Jesus the tree and God the great pruner. Any branch in me that does not bear fruit he prunes so that it may bear more fruit. Sometimes you have to work yourself out of your own conditioned settledness to discover something new and unique that the creator has always intended for you.

Robert Coles, the Harvard psychologist, in his landmark book *The Spiritual Life of Children* recalls meeting up with a 10 year old girl named Mary and talking to her about what she thought her purpose in life was. Little Mary said, "I don't want to waste my time here on this earth! Just think of all the people the Lord hasn't sent!" "Oh no," said the little girl, "When you are put here, it's for a reason. The Lord wants you to do something. If you don't know what, then you've got to try hard to find out what. It may take time. You may make mistakes. But if you pray, He'll lead you to your direction. He won't hand you a piece of paper with a map on it, no sir. He'll whisper something, and at first you may not even hear, but if you have trust in Him and you keep turning to Him, it will be all right."

If you have trust in him and you keep turning to him, it will be all right.

The Lord whispered to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you." And Abram went.

Some of you I'm sure have heard the story about Jennifer Bricker. It's an immigrant story. Jennifer Bricker was a Romanian child born without any legs. No legs. Her body stops at her hips. Her Romanian parents were overwhelmed by her deformity and left her at the hospital. Such was how her biological family tree began and appeared to end. But she was adopted by an Illinois family and raised by a mom and dad and three siblings who loved her and told her that there was no such word as the word "can't". So little Jennifer decided that she would not settle for what everyone else would imagine for a legless girl. So early on little Jennifer took up tumbling. Gymnastic

tumbling. Hard to imagine tumbling with no legs, just a set of arms to propel you and flip you and roll you. But she did. And she grew good at it. Actually, great at it. Actually, the best high school tumbler in the state of Illinois. And it was about that time that she grew curious about her original family tree – only to learn from her adoptive parents that her Romanian name was Moceanu. “Moceanu?” she said. “You mean I have the same name as the gold medal U.S. gymnast named Moceanu? Dominique Moceanu who transfixed the world with her dexterity and skill in the 1996 Olympics. Dominique Moceanu, my gymnastics idol? Oh, and wasn’t Dominique Moceanu Romanian by birth too? It didn’t take long to get her birth papers together and some pictures and off they went to Dominique Moceanu and yes, the two were sisters. Started in the same tree – but bearing fruit in very different ways. Sometimes you just can’t settle with what you’ve been given.

So your life and mine is lived, isn’t it, somewhere between the settling and the going. Terah and his son Abram settled in the land of Haran. But then came the voice. The whisper. Go Abram. Take your barren wife and leave for the land I will give you. And I will bless you and you will be a blessing. You will bear a new fruit from an old tree. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

So where are you between the settling and the going? What are the old branches and patterns inside that family tree that need pruning? What new fruit is waiting within your mind, your heart, your soul to be born? What new land is God calling you to? What whispers are there yet to hear?

For as the story goes – The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.”

And Abram went.